

inherent in a situation where children may have exercised more real power in certain realms than their parents. At Ellis Island, the immigrant family is presented as a unit, with no internal conflicts, power relations, or gender inequalities.

Indeed, if one theme predominates in all the exhibits, it is the resilience of the immigrant family. Throughout Ellis Island we are reminded that the family, as the introductory film puts it, was the core of immigrant life. Making the family the centerpiece, however, powerfully shapes how women are presented. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the third floor, in the exhibit, *Treasures from Home*, a loving presentation of items brought from the Old World to the New—photos, embroidered lace, musical instruments, and the like. This was Daria's favorite part of Ellis Island, an understandable reaction to a rich collection of three-dimensional objects after two floors of charts, photos, and broadsides. But to the historian's more critical eye, *Treasures from Home* seemed less appealing. Bathed in the comfortable glow of nostalgia, the immigrant artifacts draw us back to an imagined golden era: not of the Old Country exactly—for we have already learned how desperate life was there and how few actually returned—but to a time when families were large, stable, and coherent; when divorce was unknown; when children obeyed their parent; and when married women remained at home cooking, cleaning, and embroidering.

Like all golden ages, this one has a basis in fact, but exists mainly in the imagination. For

romanticizing the immigrant family fails to recognize that it was not only a site of affection and collective survival, but also a battleground. Nowhere on Ellis Island is the possibility considered that the typical immigrant family of the early-20th-century was headed by a domineering patriarch, that many immigrant women and their daughters found Americanization a liberating experience, and that their quest for individual freedom produced tension and conflict with their husbands and parents. In the *Treasures From Home* exhibit, there is a case of artifacts from the Stramesi family, who migrated from Italy to Northampton, Massachusetts. Along with the embroidered towels and pillowcases are two photos of the Stramesi daughters as young women in the 1920s, their hair bobbed and their dresses in flapper style. Visitors are left to wonder how Mr. Stramesi reacted to the Americanization of his daughters.

Among both professional historians and nine-year old girls, it is now almost a cliché that history is experienced differently by men and women and that gender is a useful category of historical analysis. This is not, unfortunately, a lesson visitors will learn at Ellis Island.

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Interpreting Women's History at Male-Focused House Museums

The National Park Service holds a spectacular and largely untapped resource for interpreting the history of American women—the numerous National Park Service (NPS) house museums officially dedicated to chronicling the relationship between the private lives and the public achievements of male forefathers. The fact is that women's history tends to be obscured or underinterpreted in house museums, awash in the biographical details of great men's lives. After all, domestic space, a "woman's sphere," says more about women's private lives than men's public ones. Child care, house-cleaning, cooking, shop-

ping, receiving—are absorbing daily tasks recorded by the material culture of historic houses. People wanting insight into the lives of American patriarchs could use house museums to grasp one of the truisms of women's history—that men's lives, public and private, cannot be fully understood without reference to women, be they mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, servants, or slaves.

There are a number of longstanding reasons why this women's history resource is too infrequently used.¹ One reason is that NPS sites are especially prone to the exclusionary consequence of narrowly-defined interpretive "themes." Partly

as a result of the way sites become part of the national park system, and partly in consultation with works such as Alderson and Low's classic *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, the "clearly defined interpretive objective" has become standard. While a useful goal overall, the problem for women's history is revealed by Alderson and Low's stern warning that so-called "secondary themes" are "legitimate only as fringe benefits." This approach can be used to police against substantive interpretation of female historical occupants as diversions from the "primary objective."² Within the effort to maintain an interpretive focus on that part of the past considered more historically significant—that is, on "the great white male," to paraphrase Melville—wives have been included as "secondary themes." Most often wives have been interpreted in their capacity as tranquil and charming helpmates trapped in a kind of historic "feminine mystique." The solution is to broaden "primary themes." Interpreting the life of the "great man" of the house is simply not possible without independent consideration of the lives of associated women. For example, is a formal dining room on the tour route? Who planned dinner, and under the sway of what cultural assumptions about dinnerware, food, guests? Who made and served it? Women's history is hardly "secondary" if a formal dining space is to be understood.

Another reason that women's history is eliminated or subjugated at house museums is that visitors are generally treated as guests. This causes problems linked to the desire for the house to be presented in its best decorative light. Tours are usually brought in through front halls with interpretation taking place in tidy formal areas. In the case of 19th- and early-20th-century houses, the architecture itself aggravates the presentation by keeping workspaces and maintenance functions away from the eyes of guests. Those little back halls and impassable stairways, and those fascinating servants' rooms where museum staff so often find their offices or stage spaces located, were once the heart of the working house. Having these areas unavailable to the public makes it difficult to interpret the house as anything but a static entity. The opportunity to see the house as a dynamic, functioning space that could impart something of the daily lives of past women disappears. Instead of treating museum visitors as belated guests to the "primary" historic occupants, rich evidence could be gleaned from these work areas and contrasted with the formal, public spaces. Sometimes these areas are totally inaccessible because of fire codes or file cabinets. In such cases, showing the house the way its historic occupants wanted their home viewed by guests can

provide insight into the house's symbolic functions, while at the same time acknowledging that its actual workings are hidden. A conscious interpretation of the display function of the Victorian house, for example, would allow us to talk about the domestic ideology of the "cult of domesticity," for while "ladies" were encouraged to cultivate a public and private "delicacy," ethnic and African-American women often assisted in the backbreaking labor of maintaining the appearance of a "proper" home. The general absence of any real sense of the enormous amount of housework necessary to maintain the lifestyles presented in most house museums exacerbates the tendency to romanticize women's past domestic role. The ubiquitous gingerbread-baking demonstration, at which Warren Leon of Old Sturbridge Village has said you learn more about gingerbread than you do about women, conjures up an image of women's domestic work lives so charming you want to quit your job and dip candles. Anyone who knows anything about how tough housework was in centuries past knows something is wrong with this picture.

These caveats are not intended to diminish the tentative steps that many house museums formerly dedicated solely to male history have undertaken to balance their interpretations. Those who have been struggling to include women's history deserve our full support and thoughtful commentary. But valid as the interpretation of a famous man's wife or of breadbaking may be, as long as women's history is seen as "secondary," interpretive problems resulting from such shallow treatment will likely haunt the best efforts. With staff training and time to rethink outmoded interpretive strategies, some of the nation's most remarkable material documents of the lives of foremothers can be unlocked.

Notes

¹ For further discussion of this topic, see Patricia West, "Uncovering and Interpreting the History of Women at Male-Focused Historic House Museums," in *Restoring Women's History Through Historic Preservation*, ed. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer Goodman (Baltimore: Johns-Hopkins University Press, forthcoming).

² William T. Alderson and Shirley Payne Low, *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, 2nd ed. (1976; Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1985), 16-17.

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